

Cachalú Reserve, Colombia: Land of Heaven

1. Today we are going to learn about a very special place. How many of you have a place that is special to you? (*ask for some examples from class*) Well, just like you, animals have special places too—called habitats—where they live. An animal's habitat provides it food and a place to live. Without their habitat, animals would not be able to live.
2. High in the Andes Mountains of South America, there is a place that is called Cachalú. Cachalú means "the land of heaven" to the people who once lived there. The forests of Cachalú are special because they are home to so many kinds of animals and plants.
3. Cachalú is located in the country of Colombia. Colombia is a country that has many different types of habitats, or ecosystems. It has beaches, savannas, mountains and even part of the Amazon rainforest. We are going to learn about the mountains of Colombia, called the Andes.
4. The Andes Mountains run from Venezuela to Chile all along the western coast of South America. Some of the highest mountains in the world are part of the Andes. The Andes are the ancient home of the Incas. In Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador you can find what scientists call the "Tropical Andes." These mountains are particularly important to conservationists because they have a large number of species that are found nowhere else in the world.
5. Most of the forest at the foot of the Andes has already been cut down to grow crops like coffee and corn for people who live there and to be sold to the United States. But higher up on the mountains you can still find rich forests. There are three major types of habitat found in Cachalú: oak forests (rainforest), cloudforests and páramo. Oak forests are found at the lower elevations (or heights) of the mountains. The oak forests of the Andes are very rare, and are home to more than 225 species of birds.
6. Higher on the mountain you will find misty rainforests—called cloudforests. Cloudforests are found only high on the mountains where clouds gather around the mountains and keep them shrouded in a misty layer all day. These forests are very important for gathering water for rivers and for protecting arboreal (or tree-dwelling) plants like bromeliads and orchids.
7. And even higher than that, you can find a very rare type of place called "Páramo." Do you think that it's hot or cold in the Páramo? At the top of the Andes the temperature is very cold. They regularly get snow during the winter months. The plants and animals that live in the Páramo have to be able to adapt to the cold weather. Plants grow low to the ground and develop thick leaves that help them survive the cold. Some plants have even developed fur—like this plant, the "frailejon" (pronounced "fry-lay-hone"). Frailejons not only develop furry hair-like structures on their leaves, they can live to be more than 200 years old!
8. One of the most special animals found in Cachalú is the spectacled bear. Spectacled bears are the only bears that live in South America. They look kind of like a black bear that would live in the United States, except that they have yellow markings around their eyes. How do you think they got the name "spectacled bear"?
9. Spectacled bears are great climbers and spend a lot of their time in trees. Spectacled bears find their favorite foods—fruits, flowers, and insects—in the trees. And, in some cases, the bears will even make their beds, that look like big bird nests, in the trees. Can you imagine how big their nests must be?
10. How many of you know what a rainforest is? (*raise hands*) Rainforests are special places for a lot of different reasons. They are special because rainforests have more kinds of plants, animals and insects than any other places on Earth. Who can think of some animals that live in the rainforest?
11. The forests of Cachalú have lots of interesting animals that live there. Some, like this emerald toucanet, are brightly colored. Toucanets, like their cousins the toucans, are not very good flyers. Their big beaks get in the way. So they mostly hop from limb to limb in the trees. Because they have to worry about being eaten by snakes and big cats, they only go on the ground to drink water and bathe.
12. Other animals in Cachalú, like this armadillo, are very plainly colored. This armadillo is called the nine-banded armadillo. Can anyone guess why it's called "nine-banded"? (*answer: it has nine bands/armored plates along its back*) Armadillos are funny little guys. When they get scared they can either roll up in a ball, dig a quick hole to hide in, or hop and

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run around to confuse their predators. Unfortunately, in the area outside of Cachalú, the armadillos are hunted by people who like to eat them.

13. Another interesting animal that lives in Cachalú is the coati. Coatis are related to the raccoon. Coatis spend most of their day digging under rocks and turning over logs looking for bugs and lizards to eat. They wander around in small groups making a lot of noise. They are very good swimmers and climbers.
14. But these animals are not the only ones living near Cachalú. Lots of people live there too. In fact, almost all of the people who live in Colombia live in the Andes Mountains (80% of the population) because the climate is comfortable and the soil is good for farming.
15. The people who live around Cachalú are mostly poor farmers. They have to work very hard to grow enough food to feed their families and to sell for money. Sometimes they hunt animals like armadillos, monkeys and birds in the park, which is illegal. And most of the farmers also raise chickens, pigs and cows for food.
16. Although all of the Andes Mountains were once covered with forest, most of the forest around Cachalú was cleared to make farms. Some of the farmers grow coffee. How many of you see your parents drink coffee every morning? Did any of you know that coffee comes from the rainforest?
17. Coffee can grow underneath the trees of the rainforest without hurting any of the animals or plants that also grow in the rainforest. For many years coffee farmers planted their coffee underneath the forest trees—this is called shade-grown coffee. These farms were really good for birds and other animals. The birds and animals used the farms as special extra habitat they could use to find food, build nests, or just spread out.
18. But recently, many coffee farmers have started to cut down the forests on their farms in order to grow more coffee. Farmers cut down the tall trees that shaded their farms in order to sell the wood and to help them grow more coffee plants in a small space. Often the farmers don't realize that what they are doing will be very bad for the animals. They need to grow more coffee because they need money to feed and raise their families—just like your parents.
19. Although Colombia must seem very far away, some of the birds that live in your neighborhood park or woods spend the winter in Colombian coffee farms and forests. They may travel more than 3,000 miles each year from the United States to the tropical forests of Colombia. During our winter the birds fly down to South America to stay warm. It's a very long trip!
20. Fundación Natura (the Nature Foundation), the people who helped create and now manage the Cachalú reserve, is working with the Rainforest Alliance to teach farmers how to make their farms good for animals. Farmers learn how important it is to keep the trees, protect the soil from erosion and to not use dangerous chemicals—called pesticides—that can pollute the water and kill wildlife.
21. All around Cachalú, the Nature Foundation is helping farmers to learn how to be good neighbors to the park. Most of the families in Rio Negro (the Black River), the closest village to Cachalú, have gardens where they grow beans, corn, squash, fruit, potatoes and other things that they eat all year long. They also grow coffee to sell for extra money to buy clothes, and other things they need. What are some of the other things that people need? (*answer: shelter, medicines, savings for emergencies, transportation, etc.*)
22. Rio Negro is high up on the mountains, without a lot of roads. The farmers and their families must carry the food they grow down the mountain to sell at the market. And most families don't have cars. Can you imagine how hard it would be to get to the supermarket on a donkey?
23. People from Fundación Natura also visit the local schools and teach the children about the park. They teach them about the animals that live there. They also teach them how important it is not to hunt the animals that live in the park.
24. Sometimes it's hard for people to learn to live with animals without hurting them. Cachalú is a very unique type of forest with some very special kinds of animals. Fundación Natura and the Rainforest Alliance are helping the people around Cachalú see that they live somewhere really special. It's important that all of us learn how to take care of the forests, animals and people that live around us. What's special about where you live?